

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



**Matthew E. Stanley, Grand Army of Labor Workers, Veterans,  
and the Meaning of the Civil War (Chicago: University of  
Illinois Press, 2021)**

Mark A. Lause

Volume 89, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090051ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0030>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lause, M. (2022). Review of [Matthew E. Stanley, Grand Army of Labor Workers, Veterans, and the Meaning of the Civil War (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 322–324.

<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0030>

make them feel that the violent episode that injured them was their fault or, that it comes with the job. As in the case cited above, the incident would simply go unreported, leaving them to feel less than human.

Healthcare workers have, thus, learned that overt resistance can be perilous to their continued employment and/or largely futile. They have learned that they can expect little or no assistance from their co-workers, their supervisors, senior hospital management, and in the great majority of examples, their joint health and safety committees, which Keith and Brophy found in too many cases to be either non-existent or ineffectual.

For Keith and Brophy, the way forward is collective action. In this regard, the pervasive and, in thousands of cases, the tragic impact of COVID-19 in hospitals and especially in long-term care homes, has served not only as a prism into the effects of the massive undermining of the “conditions of care,” but hopefully, as a ‘code white’ alarm to healthcare workers and their unions to take up the issue of workplace violence.

In the end, this reviewer shares in the authors’ hopes that exposing the disintegrating “conditions of care” in our health care institutions will serve as the missing plank to the foundation from which collective activism will spring. For this to happen, however, further connections must be made, with a critical one being a fundamental recognition that “capitalism” cares little for the health and well-being of workers – be they miners, steelworkers, grocery clerks, office workers, or health care workers. As Marx wrote in Chapter 10 of *Capital*: “It is self-evident that the labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour-power... In its blind, unrestrainable passion, its ware-wolf hunger for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum

bounds of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and health maintenance of the body... Capital cares nothing for the length of life of labour-power.” (*Capital, Vol 1*: New York 1906:291)

Code White. Violence is part of the bone and sinew of capitalist labour processes.

ROBERT STOREY

McMaster University

**Matthew E. Stanley, *Grand Army of Labor Workers, Veterans, and the Meaning of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021)**

PROFESSOR MATTHEW E. Stanley’s *Grand Army of Labor* represents a substantial and long-overdue contribution to our understanding of the Civil War, the working-class, and the Gilded Age. Those interested in any of these subjects would be well advised to consult it, and those interested in more than one of them should find it a requirement.

*Grand Army of Labor* covers the bases promised in the subtitle. Working people did not fight an unprecedented and unsurpassed war because of their views in the lawyerly debate over the Constitution, but over the prospect of their emancipation in the broadest sense. They emerged from that experience to build a working-class movement with more members, more coherence, more diversity, and more potential than it had ever had. Subsequent chapters cover the course of the labour and labour reform movements over the rest of the century. Greenbackism responded to the bipartisan postwar move to pull the government-printed “greenbacks” of the war out of circulation. The reaction defended the currency that won the war, but also from sources ranging from the antebellum paper *Labor Notes* to the difference

between the treatment of wealthy bondholders and veterans.

In the wake of the war, the Knights of Labor organized as a secret society alongside the veterans' associations, of which the Grand Army of the Republic emerged as the most powerful. Given the scale of the war and the size of the Knights, it is hard to imagine many assemblies that did not have veterans among their members. The order shared the regalia and rituals associated with the masculine fraternalism of the freemasons or veterans' organizations, but the Knights transcended the limitations of institutional service to offer a practical example of the solidarity of "the producing classes," including women and people of colour, whatever the shortcomings. Nobody missed the importance of the dramatic decision to have a black member, Frank Farrell, introduce the head of the order at the General Assembly held in Richmond, the capital of the former Confederacy. Leaders of the Knights publicly chided Virginia over its legally required colour bar.

The Richmond incident reflected the work of the distinct new socialist movement, represented by Farrell's New York District 49. A socialist party emerged in 1874, became a considerable force by the end of the decade, experienced a devastating split over anarchism in the 1880s, and was reorganized as the Socialist Labor Party in 1890, partly contributing to the rise of the Socialist Party roughly a decade later. The party, and the sentiment that sustained it, roughly clustered around the ideas of Karl Marx, who had been unqualified in his support for emancipation, the Federal Union, and the Lincoln administration. With few exceptions, though, socialism remained almost entirely a phenomenon of Northern communities, though the last of these benefited from a massive revolt against the "Money Power" across the West and South.

Veterans of the war and of the earlier abolitionist movement fueled the electoral revolt of rural America and the organization of new farmers' alliances. With the Republicans who dominated Kansas frustrating the aspirations of farmers there and Democrats in Texas doing the same in that state, bipartisan policies friendly to the railroads and banks and hostile to the producers pushed them inexorably into launching the Peoples' Party. The Populists – the term is thoroughly misused and ritually abused today – urged that the needs of the people should have priority over profits for the few. Unlike its predecessors, it mobilized legions of Confederate veterans as well as African Americans.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew from the trade assemblies associated with the Knights and had ample reason to recall the war, albeit with a particularly deferential subtext that made much of the image of Abraham Lincoln. For good reasons, the hard-working, rail-splitting president, whose pronouncements about the value and nobility of labour would be rarely tolerated in later political discouragement. Yet, the AFL's emphasis on Lincoln and appeals to the importance of government action came in the heyday of the Progressive Era. Its "pure and simple unionism" sought to improve the lives of a lot of union members within the workplace rather than to challenge its management by employers. This involved the acceptance of racial exclusion or restrictions on women or workers of colour. When the US began engaging in imperial ventures, it ignored Lincoln, who had opposed armed expansionism against Mexico and chose only to polish the statue of the wartime leader and speak on its behalf.

Stanley's book argues persuasively that any understanding of American labour requires consideration of the Civil War, and that the great conflict for "free

labour" is incomprehensible without addressing its class dimension. It presents a well-researched human story of the labour figures that shaped these movements. Their views were not simply a matter of rhetoric and ideas, but of deep personal experience and visceral feelings. Had they not been, working people would have ended the new century in much worse shape than they did.

Not that these are tales of triumph. Over time, the shadow of the war fell most darkly where its illumination could have been most enlightening, on the questions of race and war. The general deference of workers and their organizations to employer and government policies on race precluded labour initiatives to advance the most essential demands of elementary solidarity, leading to applications of segregation across and beyond the South and even a revival of a romanticized Ku Klux Klan (KKK) that often proved stronger outside of the region. Then, too, the overwhelming drumbeat that sounded in 1917 mobilized the fantasies of the glories of 1861–65. As in the earlier conflict, the Great War provided the disproportionately immigrant working-class with a means to hasten their integration into civil society.

These problems grew from the nature of the movements that came out of the Gilded Age and the character of the sources their work generated. Veterans, to be sure, represented a complex lot. Stanley's book underscores the need for a more focused study of groups of veterans underrepresented by the mass labour and labour reform movements of the Gilded Age. However limited, the written record offers enough glimpses into the views and activities of several hundred thousand black veterans to place them at the heart of labour's storey, especially in the South. Also, white Confederate veterans remained marginal in those movements, though most were never "volunteers" and took decisive action to

end the war by deserting. Many more of them would have found their way into the Knights of Labor or the Farmers Alliance than the relatively small but very violent white Democratic associations such as the KKK.

Then, there is the natural extension of rational reconstruction into socialism. Veterans in the Boston area took the initiative of launching Nationalist Clubs around Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). One participant, Charles H. Matchett, had grown up alongside the Fourierist community at Brook Farm and wore his Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) badge when he waged his 1896 socialist presidential campaign. Later, before his death in an Old Soldiers' Home, Matchett cheered the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia before a New York gathering. Such radicalism may have been rare, but it was hardly unique to Matchett and the Nationalists.

Even the carefully coiffured image of the GAR as an instrument of unwavering Republican partisanship never did justice to the diversity of veterans' associations or the spectrum of views within the GAR itself. With the development of a professional civil service to administer pensions, the GAR faced an internal revolt of those who wanted the organization to make sure that their old wartime opponents would not collect a salary for managing payments to Union veterans.

As in the wake of later wars, the memory of what veterans thought they fought to achieve became marginalized and ignored by the official and quasi-official construction of institutional memory, resulting in a sanitized version of the Lost Cause on one side and an entirely triumphant Victorious Cause on the other. The task of the historian to cut through this to the substance was masterfully done in Stanley's *Grand Army of Labor*.

MARK A. LAUSE  
University of Cincinnati